



Prayers and
Readings
for Lighting your

Advent Wreath

The Story of the Advent Wreath

Advent wreaths were originally part of folk traditions of Northern Europe. Wreaths of evergreens were decorated with candles to symbolize life and light during the dark months of winter. One legend has it that Saint Boniface first gave the wreath its Christian meaning in the eighth century. Other origin stories trace the Advent Wreath to 16th Century German Lutherans.

The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God. The evergreens that create the circle signify continuous life. Each of the four candles represents one of the Sundays of Advent. The blue (or purple) candles represent the prayer, penance, preparation, and good works we are called to do during Advent. In some traditions, a pink candle is lit on the third Sunday of Advent, which is a Sunday of rejoicing.

The light of the candles reminds us that Jesus comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life, and hope. The Advent Wreath is a way of marking time in this Season of Advent as we gradually add more light each Sunday until Christ, our Light, comes at Christmas.

First Week of Advent

Opening Prayer (as you light the first candle)

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Reading

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Luke 21.25-36

Reflection and Conversation

The thematic focus for this first Sunday in Advent is the *parousia*, or the second coming of Christ and the "end-times." In this text from Luke's Gospel, Jesus is urging his followers to be alert and to pay attention to the signs that mark this coming of the Son of Man "in a cloud." He then warns them not to be weighed down with the worries of this life, as that would prevent them from experiencing his coming. It seems that Jesus' desire, and therefore God's desire, is NOT that anyone would have to experience "distress among nations" or "faint[ing] from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world," but that we would be prepared for these things, having the strength to stand before his kingdom.

What are the things that are weighing you down with worry in this season?

What do you need to do or say or be in order to let go of those worries, freeing you to experience God's coming kingdom?

What signs of God's kingdom did you see this past week?

What practices might you take on in this coming week that would help you prepare to be more present to Christ all around you?

What practices might you take on in this coming week that would give you strength both physically and spiritually?

Closing Prayer

God of Abraham and Sarah, God of all the patriarchs and matriarchs of old, God who was and is and is to come: make our hearts ready for Christ to make his home among us. May we be obedient to your call and be ready and watchful to receive him here, a lamp to our feet and a light to our path; for you are our light and our salvation. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen.

Second Week of Advent

Opening Prayer *(as you light two blue candles)*

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Reading

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Luke 3.1-6

Reflection and Conversation

Luke's Gospel literally places John the Baptist smack dab in the middle of the tensions between the occupying Roman government and the Jewish Temple authorities. This location has important implications for John's message of repentance, and just in case those implications were too subtle for us readers, Luke uses Isaiah 40 to make his point more obvious. The scene into which John the Baptist speaks is a wilderness unprepared for the coming of God's salvation which will turn everything on its head so that nothing will ever be the same. John's baptisms in the Jordan River, then, are symbols of what needs to happen for God's people to experience the complete change in the status quo, the total transformation of the world.

What amends do you need to make (and to whom) this Advent?

How do you plan to live out your baptismal promises (*Book of Common Prayer*, pages 304-305) in the next week? In the next year?

How might living into your Baptismal promises transform the world around you and change your status quo?

Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever.

Shine your light in our darkest places, and because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Third Week of Advent

Opening Prayer *(as you light three candles)*

Stir up your strength, O Lord, and with great might come among us.

Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgment and that we might share with those around us the good news of your power and love; for you are our light and our salvation. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen.

Reading

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

[The] people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah..."

Luke 3.7-18

Reflection and Conversation

John the Baptist has a difficult pill for the crowds to swallow and he gets their attention by calling them a pack of snakes. He seems frustrated by the people's carelessness and apathy. Rather than making any changes in their lives, they're relying on the Abrahamic Covenant that they've been born into to be enough, as if their last name or their social status is what matters to God. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," he warns them. Notice then, that when the people ask them what they should do, his response is that they should care for those who are in need. Those of you that have, give to those who have not. And when tax collectors and soldiers, two of the most despised groups in this culture, ask what they need to do to live into this new life he's proclaiming, notice that he doesn't tell them to stop being tax collectors or soldiers. Instead, he urges them to do their jobs honestly, graciously, and in ways that protect the most vulnerable.

What are the cultural or societal identities that you rely too heavily on?

How are you called to share what you have been gifted with this week?

How might you do your job or live out your daily life in a more honest, gracious way? How can you help protect the most vulnerable in our city?

Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Your prophet John the Baptist was witness to the truth as a burning and shining light. Help us, who have been baptized into Christ, to be ready to welcome him into our hearts, and to grow strong in faith by the power of the Spirit. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen.

Fourth Week of Advent

Opening Prayer (as you light all four candles, the final blue one last)

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Reading

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1.39-55

Reflection and Conversation

The Magnificat, as it is called in the liturgies of the church, is Mary's song of praise to God for what God is doing within her. She has made a risky journey to visit and stay with Elizabeth and Zechariah, and even the child in Elizabeth's womb knows that something holy is about to happen. Mary is the *theotokos*, the God-bearer and soon she will vulnerably give birth to the incarnation of God.

**What are the things that God is doing/has done in your life that you want to give thanks for?
What challenging, risky, or uncertain thing(s) might God be inviting you into this season?
How will you be a God-bearer to those you will gather with this Christmas?**

Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, merciful and gentle: to you be praise and glory for ever. Your light has shone in our darkened world through the child-bearing of blessed Mary and the faithful fathering of holy Joseph; grant that we who have seen your glory may daily be renewed in your image and prepared like them for the coming of your Son. Though they were afraid, they responded to your call with joy. Help us, whom you call to serve you, to share with them in your great work of bringing love and healing to our world. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen.

A Final Word

The wait is almost over...Christmas Eve is tomorrow!

There are lots of last minute things to prepare, presents to wrap and stockings to hang up.

Even though this is a very busy and exciting time, remember to stop and think about the true meaning of Christmas. Make time to read the Christmas story (Luke 2.1-20) with a friend or with your family. Give of your time to help out, slow down enough to be present to these special moments with your loved ones and together give thanks.

**As you use your Advent Wreath
to mark time this season,
please also mark your calendars
for these important offerings
from St. Mark's:**

Sundays in Advent

Worship services will be held at 7.45am & 10.00am every Sunday in Advent.
Intergenerational Formation and Fellowship begins at 9.00am.
Breakfast will be provided each week.

Advent I	Dec. 2	Advent wreath-making with teaching
Advent II	Dec. 9	St. Nicholas (Bishop of Myra) Celebration
Advent III	Dec. 16	Christmas Pageant and Living Nativity
Advent IV	Dec. 23	Las Posadas

Other Advent Offerings

Dec. 9	5.00pm	Advent Lessons & Carols with St. Mark's Choirs
Dec. 12	6.30pm	Advent Quiet Evening in Bethlehem Chapel
Dec. 15	10.00am	Christmas Pageant Rehearsal on 3rd Floor
Dec. 15	3.00pm	Texas Children's Choir Christmas Concert

Christmas Eve

Monday, December 24

3.45pm Prelude, 4.00pm Holy Eucharist with Children, Treble & Youth Choirs
6.45pm Prelude, 7.00pm Holy Eucharist with St. Mark's Choir
10.00pm Prelude, 10.30pm Holy Eucharist with St. Mark's Choir (with incense)

Christmas Day

Tuesday, December 25
10.00am Holy Eucharist

First Sunday After Christmas

December 30

Holy Eucharist at 10.00am (no 7.45am liturgy)
Congregational Christmas Lessons & Carols